



Queensland University of Technology
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[Hudson, Peter B.](#), Graham, Keith, & [Willis, Jill](#)
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How can principals enhance teacher job satisfaction and work commitment?

Keith Graham, Peter Hudson, and Jill Willis
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

Teachers leave the teaching profession at different stages throughout their careers. When mid-career teachers leave the profession, there is a potential loss of experienced, quality staff. Increasingly principals have the responsibility for recruiting and keeping quality staff, which translates to responsibility for arresting the attrition rate. This paper reports on an ongoing study that investigates how school leadership may affect teacher job satisfaction in order to understand how principals can enhance teacher work commitment. This paper uses the domains of leadership identified in Education Queensland's Leadership Matters Framework (2008) to compare school leaders' and teachers' perceptions about mid-career teachers' leaving the profession. Five current principals and five ex-teachers participated in semi-structured, qualitative, individual interviews about which leadership practices impact on teacher work commitment. The ideas identified by each cohort were coded through a content analysis. The five domains of leadership (i.e., personal, relational, intellectual, organisational and educational leadership) provided an analytical framework. Both participant groups indicated relational leadership practices as the strongest influence on teacher work commitment. The relational skills, such as valuing staff, being approachable, being consistent with staff interactions, having good interpersonal skills and developing staff strengths, were noted to have specific impacts on teachers' work commitment. There were significant differences between the groups, with the ex-teachers rating the personal leadership practices as the second most important practice that can influence teacher work commitment. In contrast, the principals felt that the organisational and education leadership practices were of next importance for teacher work commitment. The findings have implications for principal leadership professional learning. Improving relational skills may help school leaders to increase teacher work. Teacher attrition is a serious concern to many education jurisdictions and by understanding reasons for decline in commitment, jurisdictions can redress the negative impact of leadership practices and keep teachers committed and in the profession. However, further research needs to incorporate more participants through a quantitative study to validate connections with the qualitative findings presented in this current study.

Introduction

Teacher attrition is one of the more serious issues facing educational systems today. Much research has been done focusing on early-stage teachers and reasons for their attrition,

however, mid-career stage teachers have not been the subject of the same rigorous studies. Work commitment of mid-career stage teachers is a growing concern and understanding the dynamics of this group may help to retain teachers who have expressed a desire to remain in the profession long term. Teachers make decisions about leaving the profession based on many factors but the underlying reason they give for leaving the profession after passing the five year career mark is their dissatisfaction and waning commitment to the role (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2004; Ingersoll, 2000; MacDonald, 1999; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). While factors influencing teacher attrition can be both intrinsic and extrinsic, a key influential factor is the school principal's leadership practices (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Harrell, Leavell, van Tassel, & McKee, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). The principal can set the tone for the school and this tone and culture has a significant impact on teacher satisfaction. However, determining specific principal's practices that impact on teacher work commitment requires further investigation. This study attempts to advance existing research by focusing on ex mid-career teachers' and principals' perceptions of leadership practices that may help to maintain teacher work commitment and, ultimately, retain them in the profession.

Literature review

Job satisfaction and work commitment are considered to be economic viabilities, although these appear largely variable within the workforce (e.g., Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011; Freeman, 1978). Over the last few decades there have been studies around job satisfaction and work commitment and the many variables that contribute to these two areas. For instance, an earlier study (Blood, 1969) reported about the relationship between employees' work values and their job satisfaction. Indeed, there seems to be a close relationship between work values, job rewards and job satisfaction (Imran, Arif, Cheema, & Azeem, 2014; Kalleberg, 1977) but, importantly, the quality of a leader-member exchange has been shown to positively affect job performance and job satisfaction. To illustrate, Janssen and Van Yperen's (2004) study of 170 employees across one organisation suggests that more effective work practices emerge as a result of quality exchanges with their leader.

Within the school setting, the principal takes on a key leadership role that may affect teachers' job satisfaction and work commitment (e.g., Davis & Wilson, 2000; Heller, 1993; Price, 2012). For some years, studies such as Billingsley and Cross (1992) have shown the significant influence of leadership support on teachers' job satisfaction and work commitment, that is, a principal can establish a school climate conducive to job satisfaction and work commitment. A correlational study by Taylor and Tashakkori (1995) that used regression analysis highlighted school climate (e.g., effective communication and lack of obstacles for work practices) as a stronger predictor of job satisfaction compared with other variables. In a study (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010) on job satisfaction among secondary teachers ($n=123$), a positive emotional effect for teachers was the principal support, particularly leading towards teachers' personal accomplishments in the workplace. In addition, a principal's support seemed to mediate teachers' emotional regulation for job satisfaction.

Bogler has conducted various studies around leadership and job satisfaction for teachers. Although other variables (e.g., occupational perceptions and demographic characteristics) can be attributed to teacher job satisfaction and work commitment, principals' leadership practices tend to mediate the level of satisfaction commitment (Bogler, 2001, 2002). However, an earlier study (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994) showed that leadership support was a stronger predictor of job satisfaction compared with demographic characteristics. Bogler purports that positive leadership practices tend to facilitate higher levels of commitment and satisfaction. Yet, there are many forms of leadership practices and determining the most effective practice continues to be under study.

Education has moved through a variety of leadership theories (e.g., trait, contingency, behavioural, and transactional) pertaining to leadership practices. Transformational leadership provides some indications on effective leadership practices that may contribute to teacher job satisfaction and work commitment. For example, one study (Griffith, 2004) suggests transformational leadership, with its insights on instilling values and morals in an organisation, had an indirect effect on job satisfaction and teachers' commitment to stay in the profession. Another study (Voon, Lo, Ngui, & Ayob, 2011) in Malaysia claims that transformational leadership and transaction leadership have direct relationships for enhancing teacher job satisfaction. These studies present the tenuous nature for understanding the enactment of leadership theories and their effects on job satisfaction and commitment.

The principal's leadership practices may influence job satisfaction and work commitment as a result of personal interactions to build the teacher's self-esteem, which is closely related to social identity, providing a sense of belonging to a group (Vaughan & Hogg, 2011). To illustrate, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2011) present a strong link between self-esteem and emotional stability with job satisfaction and job performance. Specifically, it appears principals' effect on teachers' job satisfaction and work commitment may be mediated through collaborative relationships by providing teachers with professional recognition and appreciation of their work (Borg, Riding, & Falzon, 1991; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006). Other more current studies (e.g., Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012) also suggest teachers' job satisfaction around administrative support and staff collegiality. Indeed, Shen et al's study proposes that variables such as the principal's background may influence teachers' job satisfaction.

Relational and affective domains are keys to principals' interpersonal practices that may affect teachers' job satisfaction and work commitment. For example, Van Maele and Van Houtte (2012) suggest that job satisfaction can be enhanced through social dimensions within teaching, especially through positive relationships in the workplace. Similarly, feelings of belonging as a result of positive relationships can lead towards teacher job satisfaction, which may mitigate motivations for leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). There is evidence that social support can alleviate stress levels and increase job satisfaction (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011). Possibly, part of the principal's relational domain is the ability to empower teachers in their work practices, which according to a substantial study (Bogler &

Nir, 2012) on 2565 teachers in Israeli primary schools, teacher job satisfaction was enhanced through teacher empowerment. Mulder (cited in Vaughan & Hogg, 2011) claims that “having more power leads to a greater sense of autonomy and satisfaction, so peripheral members can become dissatisfied, while hub members... feel a sense of satisfaction” (p. 320). These studies infer that principals need to focus on the qualities of teachers and provide relational support that empowers them.

As the school climate can be a predictor of stress levels and teacher job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012), the principal has a key role in establishing environments that enhance teacher job satisfaction and work commitment. Of course, aspects other than the principal’s relational and affective domains may have effects on job satisfaction, such as workload, student behaviour, and employment conditions (Ferguson, Frost, & Hall, 2012). Undoubtedly, all matters in a school environment are within the principal scope but the principal-teacher relationship seems to shape teacher job satisfaction and work commitment levels (Price, 2012). It is inferred that a principal leadership practices, especially the relational and affective domains that increases teacher job satisfaction, may assist in arresting the attrition rates from the teaching profession (Grissom, 2011). However, there appear to be no studies that explore how principals can affect teachers’ work commitment through an education department framework on leadership.

This current study investigates how each of the five domains of leadership practice identified by Education Queensland (EQ) impact on teacher work commitment. The research question was: How can school principals enhance teacher job satisfaction and work commitment? This question was investigated using the Leadership Matters (2008) leadership framework as the means of ordering the interview data. Responses were classified under each of the five identified domains to determine the frequency each domain was identified as an important area for teacher work commitment. This question was investigated from the perspectives of two groups - ex-teachers and current school principals - to determine which practices were most significant to each group and to determine if there was any difference between responses of the two cohorts. The purpose of this study is to further examine the link between principal leadership practices and teacher commitment. While previous studies (Boyd et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Harrell et al., 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005; Tye & O’Brien, 2002) have determined that leadership practices impact on teachers’ commitment to the profession, no study has been undertaken in Queensland state schools to determine which leadership practices may have the most impact on teacher commitment in relation to the five domains of leadership described in EQ’s leadership framework, Leadership Matters. Understanding which of the five domains of leadership practices have the most significant effect on teacher work commitment may assist to inform school principals’ practices and mitigate mid-career teacher attrition, which is a significant and growing phenomenon facing education systems today.

Research design

This paper reports on the first phase of a multiphase, mixed-methods explanatory design (Creswell, 2012). The initial qualitative aspect involved semi-structured interviews to

determine other aspects of this research that may not have been included in the literature, which can then be explored further in the multiphase design through a quantitative survey. The semi-structured interviews sought the reasons why the former mid-career teachers who had taught in Education Queensland for over five years left the profession mid-career and if the reasons they gave for resigning are related to principal leadership practices. Additional interviews with a sample of experienced current school principals based in the South East Region of Education Queensland, sought to understand how they perceived their leadership practices enhanced the career satisfaction of mid-career teachers.

Participants

There were five principals and five ex-teachers involved in this qualitative study. The five principals had an average principalship experience of 7.8 years. There were three females and two males and each one was currently leading a school of between 500 (Band 8) and 1000 students (Band 10). The ex-teachers had an average teaching career of 15.2 years in various schools and regions in Queensland (Table 1). There were two males and three females and all had left teaching within the last three years and are now working in another profession. The mid-career teachers were located through the Queensland Teachers' Union or professional teacher networks, and asked if they would like to participate in the interview, as directed through the university ethics approval. The ex-teachers were screened to ensure that they had not served at the same schools ensuring a broader return of information and a wider reflection of educational leadership. All ex-teachers volunteered to share their perceptions for leaving the teaching profession.

Table 1. Principal and ex-teacher gender and professional context

Participants	Gender	Professional Context
<i>Principal</i>		<i>Years as Principal (current school size)</i>
1	M	12 (Band 9)
2	F	6 (Band 9)
3	M	9 (Band 10)
4	F	4 (Band 8)
5	F	8 (Band 9)
<i>Ex-teacher</i>		<i>Years in teaching</i>
1	F	17 Years
2	M	20 Years
3	M	12 Years
4	F	8 Years
5	F	19 years

Interviews

The interviews enabled participants to share perceptions of practice in schools, grounded in a realist epistemology that sought to identify relationships between leadership practices and mid-career teacher commitment (King & Horrocks, 2010). There was potential for the ex-teachers to feel uncomfortable in discussing their reasons for leaving the profession, so all participants were able to choose the location for the interview, and direct the conversation

after the initial questions. All participants were asked to verify their de-identified transcripts before each transcript was analysed. The following questions guided the interviews:

Questions for principals

1. What have you done to enhance the work commitment of mid-career teachers?
Comment on the effectiveness of your response in that situation.
2. What practices do you believe a school principal can display to enhance mid-career teachers' work commitment?

Questions for ex-teachers:

1. You have recently resigned from the teaching profession, what reasons can you share for making this decision?
2. What leadership practices can a principal exhibit to make teachers feel more committed to their work?

Analytic approach

Interview data were transcribed and coded for the content themes that related to issues about work commitment and leadership, an analytic approach frequently used in mixed-methods studies (Fakis, Hilliam, Stoneley, & Townsend, 2014). While many of the content themes had appeared in the literature, there were a few that were emergent such as specific leadership practices (e.g., Not being able to say good morning, Acting friendly only when someone important visits the school, Not knowing a thing about my family circumstance), which the ex-teachers articulated had a significant impact on their work commitment. The second phase of analysis used EQ's Leadership Matters framework (2008) to classify the content codes from the interview transcripts. Leadership Matters (2008) outlines five domains of leadership (i.e., personal, relational, intellectual, organisational and educational leadership), that an EQ school principal should demonstrate in their leadership capabilities. Beneath each of these five domains are descriptors that outline examples of leadership practices. To ascertain the impact from different leadership practices, the interview content was analysed and each stated idea was isolated and categorised under the five dimensions of leadership. From the data, the most frequent dimension of leadership in relation to teacher commitment was identified for both groups and a comparative analysis was made between the two groups.

As each respondent articulated a point that they felt impacted on mid-career teachers' work commitment, it was classified under the appropriate domain heading. This was done for each of the two interviewed groups – current principals and ex-teachers – to determine the frequency of responses for each leadership domain. Data were analysed to determine which category of leadership had the strongest influence on mid-career teacher work commitment from the perspective of teachers who have left the profession, and which category of leadership current serving state school principals in Queensland felt impacted on mid-career teacher commitment. Data were translated into a line graph for comparisons between the perspectives of the two interviewed groups.

Findings

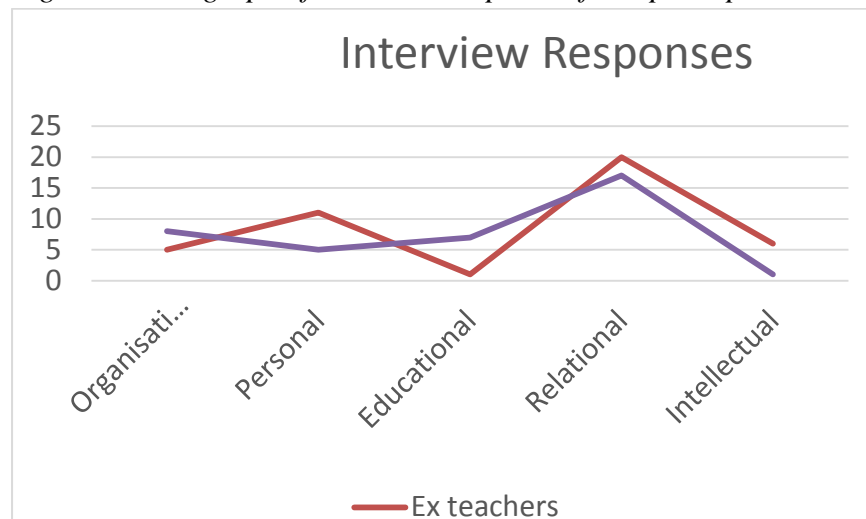
Using the Leadership Matters (2008) leadership domains, findings indicated that both principals and ex-teachers rated relational leadership practices as the most significant in

relation to teacher work commitment; however there was a difference between the two groups on how the other four domains impact on teacher commitment (Table 1). The differences between the groups are visually represented in Figure 1.

Table 2. *Participant responses linked to the leadership domains*

Leadership domains	Principals	Ex-teachers
Organisational	8	5
Personal	5	11
Educational	7	1
Relational	17	20
Intellectual	1	6

Figure 1. *Line graph of interview responses from principals and ex-teachers*



From the open-ended questions regarding their experiences around what leadership practices principals believed impacted on the commitment of mid-career teachers, 17 of the 38 themes (45%) raised by principals were associated with the relational domain of leadership. The relational domain was indicated by the principal through responses such as: valuing staff, being approachable, being consistent with staff interactions, having good interpersonal skills, and developing staff strengths, differentiating the supervision of staff). Data revealed that the other four domains of leadership shared 55% of alternative themes raised by the principals, that is, organisational (21%), personal (13%), educational (18%) and intellectual (3%). Although organisational, personal and educational responses were weighted similarly between principals, the intellectual domain of leadership received one mention only between the five principals, thus perceiving this domain as the least important in relation to mid-career teacher commitment.

Knowing and valuing staff was considered an important relational component, particularly knowing the teachers at a more personal level that may facilitate a more satisfying work

environment, for example: “Know the names of your teachers, know their stories, who likes public praise who prefers a word on the side. Find out their strengths and utilise them to make them valued contributors to your school” (Principal 3). This relational domain extends to teachers and connecting with other important school stakeholders, as noted in the following statement:

If I can just talk a little bit also about my principalship, I recognise the importance that staff see I value them and that I recognise the importance of relationships.... between the leadership of the school, students and parents, the strong relationships between that person and their colleagues. (Principal 2)

It was emphasised that “It is not about socialising and friendships but it is about professional connectedness and a feeling of collegial support and spirit”, however, “Once you have this part right the rest such as curriculum and programs and raising expectations and outcomes – which are still important – come easier. If you don’t get the interpersonal right it can have a negative effect on teachers’ commitment” (Principal 3). The connection between interpersonal (relational) skills and teachers’ work commitment was presented as a positive correlational proposal, that is, as one increases the other can increase and vice versa. Indeed, the majority of principal responses were phrased with a positive perspective. They recounted what they do and what teachers require them to maintain commitment. Only one principal spoke from a deficit model describing what was missing at a school, recounting a principal he had worked for as a deputy principal and not what was done at the school he was leading. Overall, the principals articulated positive responses on how mid-career teachers can enhance work commitment and also they recounted leadership practices that they implemented at their schools for ensuring teacher work commitment.

Similar to principal interview data, the ex-teachers rated relational leadership practices as the most significant in relation to their work commitment. Forty-seven per cent of teacher responses were related to the relational domain, emphasising the importance of principals’ interpersonal skills for ensuring work commitment. Specific negative principal actions mentioned by these ex-teachers included “condescending attitude”, “dismissive of staff opinions”, “not valued”, “no empathy for being a parent as well as a teacher”, and “focussed on compliance and not the impact on people”. According to the ex-teachers, principals had a key effect on their work commitment, particularly when they were not feeling valued or their issues were dismissed within the workplace. Ex-teacher 4 commented about a principal’s counter-productive approach, which had a negative effect on the teacher’s attitude leading to a willingness to leave the profession, to illustrate:

Again I was dismissed with a comment along lines of if they are too unprofessional to see me then their opinions are not valid. This whole dismissive and condescending attitude made me seethe. It was a good school with good staff, doing a wonderful job, but this principal’s way of doing business was counter-productive to the school and really declined my commitment to the point I want to leave. (ex-teacher 4)

As anticipated, there may have been ex-teachers who had deep-seated issues leading towards leaving the education system. These issues tended to be around the principal’s relational domain, especially showing empathy and being approachable:

The principals I have worked with do not have children themselves or haven't had their own children so I don't believe that they have any empathetic, sympathetic bone in their body that can relate to a parent. OK the ideal principal. Someone who is easy to talk to, who is approachable, that is open to listening to other people's views without dismissing them. (ex-teacher 5)

While the ex-teachers aligned with the principal group in stating that relational leadership was the most significant domain for teacher commitment, they did appear to come from a different perspective than the principal group. The ex-teachers primarily recounted their responses from a deficit model and on what was missing from their principals in their schools. While there were some positively phrased themes, or comparisons made between what they had experienced under different school leaders, primarily all responses made by the ex-teacher group were framed around what they needed from a principal but did not receive, and the shortcomings of their principals' leadership practices leading to them choosing to leave the teaching profession.

While the most frequently raised theme (relational) remained constant for the two groups, there was a significant difference in the importance of the other leadership domains and their impact on teacher commitment. The data shows that the second most raised theme by the ex-teachers was also centred on the personal aspects of the principal and how they conducted themselves. The ex-teachers listed 25% of their total responses in this domain of leadership making it clearly their second area of interest. Unlike the principals the area of least impact on the commitment of ex-teachers was the Education domain recording only one answer from the five ex-teachers.

Discussion

This study was undertaken within a framework about how school principals' leadership practices may influence mid-career teachers' work commitment. This perspective was formed from previous research into teacher commitment, which concluded that once past the five year mark in their careers, a mid-career teacher's commitment to the teaching profession can be heavily influenced by principals' leadership practices (Boyd et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Harrell et al., 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Pillai et al., 2005; Tie & O'Brien, 2002). The school principal, as site supervisor, is the most salient person in the work environment and is in the position of representing the organisation's culture and exerting a direct influence on teachers' behaviour and well-being (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989). What is not known is which specific principal leadership practices influence teacher commitment from the perspective of ex mid-career teachers.

Although the ex-teachers' responses varied markedly from the principals there was a common trend around the importance of relational leadership. All ex-teachers in this study were very willing to talk and share their reasons for leaving the teaching profession and, in line with the research of Bogler (2001, 2002), they quoted principal leadership practices as the primary reason for leaving teaching. All of the ex-teachers interviewed spent a significant amount of time teaching for Education Queensland (average 15.2 years) before electing to

leave the teaching profession; consequently making a decision to leave would come at emotional and financial costs. This infers that negative relational leadership practices can impact on teachers' job satisfaction and work commitment, even at the expense of emotional and financial costs.

From a comparison of data it can be seen that both the principals and ex-teachers felt that relational leadership practices have the strongest impact on mid-career teachers' job commitment. The combined total for these responses was 47%, or in other words nearly half of all responses from both interviewed group were in the relational domain. Beyond the commonalities of the most frequent response there is then a clear difference between what the principals and ex-teachers believe impacts on their commitment. From the phrasing of the ex-teacher comments there is also a belief that these personal traits were missing from their principals in addition to their relational skills and the absence of these combined was the primary reason given (72% of ex-teachers' comments) for leaving the teaching profession. Conversely, the principals rated the personal domain lower and felt that Organisational and Educational leadership practices were of next importance. Significantly the principals contradicted the phrasing of the ex-teachers and answered in a positive framework and belief that these leadership practices happen in their schools and keep teachers committed. These principals felt that their relational leadership practices were supportive of teachers and that the organisational and educational domains of leadership were what teachers need next to enhance their work commitment. The principals held their own personal and intellectual leadership as the lowest domains of significance on teacher commitment.

The ex-teachers, while agreeing with principals that relational leadership was of utmost importance, clearly described the absence of these practices at sites where they had worked. Repeatedly they listed practices that they believed should have been present but were not, and that the absence of these practices led to their decisions for leaving the profession. Reinforcing their belief in the value of relationships by the school leader, the personal leadership domain of school principals was also a significant area for the ex-teachers. Indeed, combining principals relational and personal domains constituted the main reasons for ex-teachers' work commitment or lack thereof.

What this study set out to determine was which domain of leadership practices, as outlined by Education Queensland's leadership framework, had the strongest impact on teacher work commitment because very little research has been done in this area. If a clearer relationship between specific leadership practices and the impact on mid-career teacher work commitment was understood, leadership training and ongoing leadership development could therefore focus on the leadership practices of school principals to ensure a positive correlation between the principal leadership practices and mid-career teacher commitment.

This study raises several implications. First, it is essential to ensure that principal leadership training and principal selection is based around the relational leadership practices, which this research suggests not only encourages teacher work commitment but also may address the equally important fact that one-third of all new teachers leave the teaching profession within

their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2003). While the principals were aware of the significance of their relational leadership, the perspectives of how well these were delivered greatly differed amongst the two cohorts. Second, it was obvious that there was a discrepancy in what other leadership practices could influence teacher commitment. Each cohort had different views on the importance of the other areas and these converging views did not align. It would be of great value for principals to understand what other aspects of leadership teacher expected for work satisfaction and how these differed from their own. These first two points also raise the issue of leadership training. What training is given to principals to develop into leaders and what further training may be needed? Specifically, if there is a difference in the beliefs of ex-teachers and principals, which was evident in the data but perhaps not fully understood by school principals, training in specific leadership practices may be of benefit to give principals a greater understanding of what is required by teachers and, more importantly, how teacher perceive the behaviours the principals are exhibiting.

A final area of discussion would be in the area of the disposition of the ex-teachers and their understanding of the leadership role and their personality types. Do they have unrealistic expectations of their principal or do they have a history of needing much personal attention in their role? This research set out to investigate how principals can enhance teacher job satisfaction and work commitment. By understanding a clearer relationship between specific leadership practices and the impact on mid-career teacher work commitment, leadership training and ongoing leadership development can therefore focus on the leadership practices of school principals to ensure a positive correlation between the principal leadership practices and mid-career teacher commitment, so that schools can achieve effective outcomes from principals and teachers.

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